

DOMESTIC TRAUMA AND COLONIAL GUILT: A STUDY OF SLOW
VIOLENCE IN *DOMBEY AND SON* AND *BLEAK HOUSE*

BY

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Abstract

In this study of Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House*, I examine the two forms of violence that occur within the homes: slow violence through the naturalized practices of the everyday and immediate forms of violence. I argue that these novels prioritize the immediate forms of violence and trauma within the home and the intimate spaces of the family in order to avoid the colonial anxiety and guilt that is embedded in the naturalized practices of the everyday. For this I utilize Rob Nixon's theory on slow violence, which posits that some practices and objects that occur as part of the everyday possess the potential to be just as violent as immediate forms of violence. Additionally, the British empire's presence within the home makes the home a dark and violent place. *Dombey and Son* does this by displacing colonial anxiety, such as Mr. Dombey's imperialistic business practices, onto the home through his abuse of his daughter. In *Bleak House*, the home is full of colonial objects that both decorate the home and unsettle it. While the interactions between colonial and domestic objects seem to disquiet the home, the trauma of abuse and neglect, particularly Esther's childhood abuse, overshadow the slow forms of degradation from the empire that haunt the home.

Introduction

Many of Charles Dickens's novels deal with the turmoil that occurs within the home, specifically the trauma of childhood and young adulthood, such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and child labor. For examples, we might look at characters of his, such as Florence Dombey, David Copperfield, Esther Summerson, and Amy Dorritt. For this study I examine Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1848) and *Bleak House* (1853) for the way they deal with these issues of trauma in combination with the novels' representation of the British empire as causing immediate and invisible forms of violence within the English home. There are two forms of violence that occur within the homes of these novels: slow violence through the naturalized practices of the everyday¹ and immediate forms of violence and trauma. I argue that these novels prioritize the immediate forms of violence and trauma within the home and the intimate spaces of the family in order to avoid the colonial anxiety and guilt that is embedded in the naturalized practices of the everyday. The naturalized practices of the everyday, such as the treatment of a servant (imported from India), the decorations or resources within a house, and the weather, are perceived as mundane and insignificant next to more violent forms of shock that characters such as Esther and Florence experience within the intimacy of the home. And yet, Rob Nixon's use of slow violence informs us that some practices and objects of the everyday possess the potential to be just as violent as immediate forms of violence despite their seemingly insignificant role in Dickens's novels. In this study, I argue that the British empire's presence within the home makes the home a dark and violent place. *Dombey and Son* does this by displacing colonial anxiety, such as Mr. Dombey's imperialistic business practices, onto the

¹ I am not using everyday theory in my approach. Instead, my use of the "everyday" refers to Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose's definition. They describe the everyday as a practice or object that is taken for granted or naturalized into normalcy.

home. In the case of Mr. Dombey, this means making him an abusive father and not an exploitative businessman. In *Bleak House*, the home is full of colonial objects that both decorate the home and unsettle it. While the interactions between colonial and domestic objects seem to disquiet the home, the trauma of abuse and neglect, particularly Esther's childhood abuse, overshadow the slow forms of degradation that haunt the home.

Both novels explicitly and implicitly engage in colonial discourse and the ideologies that navigate and naturalize the hegemonic structures that colonialism implements.² These ideologies include beliefs about British supremacy, race, gender, progress (industrialization), and capitalism in order to justify the exploitation and oppression of colonial subjects. Such ideologies, assumed as common sense, make injustices invisible or mundane and allow the conscious guilt or anxiety felt by British society about these injustices to be redirected or absorbed into English domestic spaces. In *Dombey and Son*, the world outside of London and the Dombey home is evident in the business practices of Mr. Dombey. And yet, for the members of the Dombey household the foreign is the unknown and dangerous world that is far away. This distant world infringes upon the home through Mr. Dombey's business and threatens first Mrs. Dombey, then Paul Dombey, and finally Walter Gay. In contrast, *Bleak House* brings the foreign and colonial into the close intimate spaces of the home, transforming colonial objects and voiding them of history, so that they are no longer recognizable as the "other."

² Edward Said claims that "the novel generally, and narrative in particular... have a sort of regulatory social presence in West European societies." Within this presence the British had undisputed supremacy in the nineteenth-century when it came to the novel. According to Said, the English novel represented the aesthetics of English society and consequently lacked the necessary albeit fragmented representations of the world more globally involved in the British Empire (74).

The Victorian novel became a scene for defining the English domestic as a space that was different from and opposed to the frighteningly foreign “abroad.”³ Because, as Said claims “imperialism and the novel fortified each other to such a degree that it is impossible... to read one without in some way dealing with the other,” it is revealing to see how the novel deals with foreign entities that are still within the empire. The rising discomfort about imperialism in mid-century England shows up in the novel as a fear of the foreign (Said 71). Edward Said claims that “[for] the British writer, ‘abroad’ was felt vaguely and ineptly to be out there, or exotic and strange, or in some way or other ‘ours’ to control, trade in ‘freely,’ or suppress when the natives were energized into overt military or political resistance” (74). As Said suggests, there was both the fear and anxiety over the strangeness associated with the world outside of England as well as the possessiveness of paternalistic policies that aimed to rectify these anxieties through colonial rule. The structure of power inherent in colonialism was meant to ensure the separation between the foreign and the domestic and thereby stifle English fear. However, despite this separation, the juxtaposition of colonial objects at home and domestic habitations abroad, necessitated the hybridization of the domestic and the foreign and aroused English fear about colonial violence coming into the home. Therefore, in order to understand the rising discomfort toward imperialism that is evident in nineteenth-century England,⁴ it is necessary to see the way foreign entities contained within the empire were handled in the novel.

³ Lynn Pykett claims that we can also see the interest in and anxiety toward the domestic growing through the literary movement from romance, to newgate, sensation, and detective novel. Pykett describes this as a movement from Italian monasteries and jails to the secrets of the home and what Pykett calls “the respectable world.” While this particular argument is not immediately relevant to mine, it reveals parallel trends that analogously articulate my claims.

⁴ Patrick Brantlinger disagrees with Hall’s and Rose’s argument that British people operated under “unconscious acceptance” of the Empire. Instead he claims that they knowingly supported colonialism for the good of the country and characterizes their attitudes as liberal optimism. The decline of this optimism (or in the case of Hall and Rose, the increase in consciousness) in favor

One of the important ways that Dickens represents the empire is through his use of the “everyday.” In the nineteenth-century, of course, England became the center of the world’s largest empire. According to Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, “that empire was, in important ways, taken-for-granted as a natural aspect of Britain’s place in the world and its history” (2). They claim that the empire impacted “the everyday” within the metropole and therefore “was not *necessarily* a matter of consciousness or deliberation” (emphasis Hall and Rose 21). Much of what made up the everyday mundane appeared harmless, such as fashion or social rituals, but was nonetheless crucial to the development of imperial attitudes in Britain. These attitudes led to naturalized practices of the everyday, including fiscal exploitation as well as emotional and physical abuse of colonial others at home and abroad as the result of colonial structures inscribed within hegemonic and cultural “everyday” practices.

In both *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House*, the accumulation of acts of slow, invisible violence, or the naturalized and mundane aspects of what is represented as the everyday, have similar consequences to an act of immediate violence (Nixon 258). “Slow violence” is a term coined by Rob Nixon to describe how the accumulation of seemingly insignificant acts can have dire consequences over time (257).⁵ I equate his use of slow violence with what Hall and Rose call the everyday in order to make sense of the anxiety and grief encapsulated in each of these novels. These naturalized practices of the everyday are the result of colonial structures inscribing themselves within familiar domestic spaces such as the decorations of Bleak House, the Dombey household, or Major Bagstock’s home. Additionally, the naturalized practices of

of self-doubt and pessimism is what I find most important to both arguments. Here in this pessimistic space lies the colonial guilt that processes of the everyday try so hard to ignore.

⁵ Nixon uses the examples of domestic abuse and post-traumatic stress to exemplify how “[t]he temporal dispersion of slow violence impacts the way we perceive and respond to a variety of social afflictions.”

exploiting colonial subjects and resources also accumulate and perpetuate *slow violence* and consequently inflict long-term degradation. And since highly visible acts of violence are considered more newsworthy, Nixon claims that these instances of slow violence require “iconic symbols” and “narrative forms” in order to “infuse them with dramatic urgency” and force acknowledgement as issues crucial to local, national, and global security (Nixon 259).⁶ The narrative forms of *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House* infuse dramatic urgency into their concern with the domestic (and its characters such as Florence, Esther, and the Jellyby children).

The naturalized practice of the everyday as a form of slow violence is demonstrated through the repetitive beatings of Major Bagstock’s servant, ““The Native, who had no particular name, but answered to any vituperative epithet,” in Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (303). These passages criticize Major Bagstock as an immoral colonial oppressor, but also provide comic relief at the expense of the native servant. For instance, Major Bagstock says he will “flay the Native alive” while he struggles to get his rotund figure into Mr. Dombey’s carriage (310). Because the Major’s large flailing figure is humorous, it downplays the significance of his brutal threat against his servant. And yet, the narrator’s ridicule of Major Bagstock also implies that there is something amiss and absurd about him so that his foolishness and his violence parallel each other. Even though the novel never suggests that the servant is traumatized (after all we never learn about his feelings and thoughts), we might consider the repeated beatings as part of

⁶ Nixon’s argument, while focused on Wangari Maathai and Kenya’s Green Belt Movement and the claim that this movement reframed conflict resolution and environmental activism in postcolonial Nigeria, insists that even seemingly insignificant and mundane aspects of environmental justice (deforestation and soil erosion) are crucial to local, national, and global security. This movement involved the symbolic act of tree planting which both addressed the environmental concerns of deforestation (brought on by colonial actions and attempts to control wilderness) as well as issues of gender. Maathai’s movement responded to the dwindling economic and territorial control allotted to women (through colonial theft, male ownership, soil erosion, and deforestation). It allowed women to lay claim to the earth and play a role in holding down the soil and increasing flora (270-1).

the naturalization of the Native's racial otherness within the novel and therefore the text's implicit consent to his abuse. The Major's beatings inscribe the Native's identity as a colonized subject onto his body, making him an object of the Major's obscure colonial guilt. However, soon after the Major's threat, Dombey's mind wanders to Paul's death and is bitter about the public invading his private grief. *Dombey and Son* represses the recognition or full experience of the Native being beaten in order to focus on the familial concerns of the Dombey household, signifying the displacement of this colonial guilt.⁷ Thus, I would posit that the displacement of or the failure to recognize colonial guilt naturalizes the injustice of the beatings and requires the violence and feelings of guilt to resurface unresolved within the Dombey home in other ways, such as in the anxiety and traumatization of Florence Dombey.⁸

In contrast, Dickens deals with colonial guilt in *Bleak House* by juxtaposing colonial objects within domestic spaces and voiding them of meaning. These objects of colonial guilt primarily express tastefulness and bring comfort to the people who own them, such as the "delightfully irregular" decorations of Bleak House (85). Esther's reference to the irregularity of the colonial acquisitions throughout the house reveals her subtle discomfort with these colonial objects, such as a chair from India and a Chinese painting of a Chinese tea juxtaposed with domestic ones, such as a stuffed English trout. And yet, her additional indications that the combinations of these colonial and domestic objects are both delightful and pleasant indicate that the comfort and tastefulness of these objects allow Esther and the narration to avoid fear or guilt.

⁷ Paul Gilroy describes colonial (postcolonial) guilt as the shame and discomfort present in realization of colonial crimes and unsettling history. According to Gilroy, this guilt often contributes to the diminishment and denial of a colonial past that is evident in imperial melancholy (a "dignified sadness") and leads to the "xenophobic responses" of a newer pathology, postcolonial melancholia (89-90).

⁸ Cathy Caruth claims that the pathology of trauma is not about the event itself, but about "the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it" (4).

In this way, colonial history is symbolically drained from these objects. The colonial violence behind the acquisition of these objects is then metaphorically absorbed into domestic violence and abuse that characters such as Esther Summerson, Jo, the Jellyby children, and the Pardiggle children suffer, so that it can be represented and dealt with as a domestic problem. Many times we see objects of colonial and domestic origins placed side by side or listed by the narrator. The most dangerous objects to the home are the undomesticated ones. In this way, the production of the mundane through its use in the home empties the objects of symbolic power and utilizes them for the alleviation of domestic trauma. Needless to say, this process of transforming the colonial into the everyday, while avoiding immediate guilt, poses its own form of violence that is inflicted through accumulation over time.

Jean-Francois Lyotard claims that modernity is “haunted by what it had violently suppressed or forgotten” (qtd in Lockhurst 5). In these terms, the postcolonial trauma of modernity is the result of the actions, systems, and the accumulation of the everyday in nineteenth-century England.⁹ By extension I would argue that race, gender, and industrialization were bound up in the nineteenth-century process of imperial slow violence that resulted in the nervous conditions and traumatization of the postcolonial world.¹⁰ However, I would also posit that Charles Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* avoids critique of these colonial structures exemplified in the Dombey and Son business, and by extension the industrialization that enables colonialism, and the possibility of colonial guilt by displacing it onto the domestic. Hall and Rose claim that

⁹ By actions, systems, and the accumulation of the everyday, I am referring to government wide actions that degraded people through land exploitation, restrictive trade agreements, racism, violence, and other more subtle racist and exploitative practices.

¹⁰ The phrase “nervous conditions” comes from Jean-Paul Sartre’s preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*. Sartre writes, ‘The status of “native” is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people with their consent’. For further reading see: Jean-Paul Sartre, “Preface.” *The Wretched of the Earth*, by Frantz Fanon, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), xix.

“the everydayness of empire held within itself a potential visibility and contestation that its ordinariness disguised,” signifying that the ordinariness of colonialism as part of the everyday disguised or hid the empire within the domestic and the home (Hall and Rose 23). This is particularly evident in *Bleak House*, where the objects of colonial conquest are juxtaposed amongst objects of the English domestic. While *Dombey and Son* avoids critique of colonialism and colonial guilt through displacement, *Bleak House* represses colonial guilt by forgetting the colonial violence behind objects and colonial allusions. These objects are made timeless and placeless. And through colonial trade and English consumption, these objects are sacrifices with which to comfort domestic trauma.

Father, Firm, and Florence in *Dombey and Son*

As an imperial figure, Mr. Dombey's firm of Dombey and Son sits between the Bank of England and the East India House in London. These institutions represent a nexus of imperial power through trade. Outside the East India House there is a "suggestion of precious stuffs and stones, tigers, elephants, howdahs, hookas, umbrellas, palm trees, palanquins, and gorgeous princes of a brown complexion sitting on carpets with their slippers very much turned up at the toes" (46). These objects represent the foreign and the exotic in commodified forms of novelty. Even the "gorgeous princes" are indistinguishable from the list of exotic objects that people pass as they walk along the street. The gathering of objects such as these from exotic locations is brushed off until a few pages later when the narrator shows Uncle Sol talking to his nephew Walter about the drowning of Charming Sally. He tells him that there were "five hundred casks of wine aboard" and that everyone aboard "got drunk and died drunk, singing 'Rule Britannia' when she settled and went down, and ending with one awful scream in chorus" (54). While the majority of passersby see the intrigue and pleasantries of the East India's House's "precious stuffs," Uncle Sol looks at his glass of old Madeira and thinks about how it has been to "the East Indies and back" and recalls the lives lost in the shipment of wine aboard the Charming Sally (54).

Mr. Dombey is part of that world of goods and trade. He is in the business of acquiring these objects and by extension losing lives like those aboard the Charming Sally in order to bring wine to England. But in contrast to Uncle Sol, Dombey does not consider the origins of the objects he acquires, moves, and sells. Instead he sees the world as his for the taking:

...the earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light. Rivers and seas were formed to float their ships;

rainbows gave them promise of fair weather; winds blew for or against their enterprises; stars and planets circled in their orbits, to preserve inviolate a system of which they were the center. (12)

The firm of Dombey and Son is represented as the center of power in the world, not unlike Britain at the center of the British empire. This passage articulates that philosophy of colonial conquest that Mr. Dombey is a part of. The wine, the princes, the umbrellas are available for the taking and the lives of the men and women aboard the ships are available for the risking. Unfortunately, Dombey's dreams for his business are spoiled in this novel, not because his business practices are exploitative, but because his son dies and he rejects his daughter. Therefore, the colonial guilt Dombey might have felt for the attitudes and actions of his firm, is displaced by his neglect and abuse of Florence.

Thus, the anxiety surrounding imperial discourse in this text is displaced onto the domestic realm of the home, and by extension the English nation, as another form of "domestic space," in order to disguise the guilt that Uncle Sol articulates about imperial violence as merely an unfortunate domestic concern that can be repaired. Dickens represents this anxiety around the domestic as experiences of rupture and brokenness. His characters experience "what Freud calls *angsthereitschaft*, or the 'readiness to feel anxiety'" (qtd. in Outka 21). The foreign is an unknown entity and part of the anxiety that arises from the text comes as a result of not knowing "what place is over there" across the ocean, as Paul asks Florence; the characters seem to be ignorant of what lies beyond England. Paul asks where India is and Master Bitherstone asks how to get back to Bengal, since his family lives there. Though Master Bitherstone imagines that he can get there by foot, Florence knows at least that India is "a long, long distance off.... Many weeks' journey, night and day;" even her knowledge, however is vague and generic (Dickens

128). Beyond the ocean is a void that separates Master Blitherstone from his family and holds unknown concerns for these children, even though their lives are deeply impacted by what goes on there.¹¹

In addition to the ocean's representation as a path leading to the unknown, Dickens also presents it as an agent of violence that creates a rupture between life and death for the characters. As a boundary, the sea is connected to the empire and to death and hence presents itself as a threatening presence for the Dombey's. For instance, in *Dombey and Son*, when characters cross the sea to go abroad they are either assumed dead as Walter is, or socially dead as is the case with Edith, Mr. Dombey's wife. In fact, when Walter becomes intimate with Florence and Paul, Mr. Dombey sends him abroad on business to get rid of him, hoping that Walter will disappear or die. Once he has left, everyone assumes that Walter is dead. While Walter does survive and succeed in the empire, Dombey intended him to disappear across the sea. The water that leads to India and Bengal, also covers sunken ships and dead people. Walter's supposed death is on Dombey's imperialist hands and therefore a source of colonial guilt that haunts him after his business fails.

Additionally, the boundary between land and sea keeps Florence and Paul Dombey safe and signifies that they are alive. Their lives would be at risk in this unknown and invisible place that is beyond the boundary of the sea. Paul Outka claims that trauma marks "a textual break or a limit in the ability of a subject to understand his or her world, a break that erupts suddenly and that reformulates both subject and world in its image subsequently" (Outka 22). Paul breaks or ruptures their detachment from the Empire when he tells Florence "if you were in India, I should die, Floy" (128). She says that she would also die if he were in India, and, as if reassuring him,

¹¹ Suvedrini Perera claims that colonial spaces are identified as "blank" and that the novel's management of empire creates a space for empire in British ideology (7).

tells him “he would be better soon” (128). India was under the rule of the British empire and was a major source of trade. This passage equates India with death, but it also foreshadows Paul’s death early in the novel. This is an interesting prediction on his part since he wields imperial economic power when he lends to Walter. He says that he would like Walter to have the money he needs and his father allows him to lend it as a first participatory act in the family business. Paul’s participation in *Dombey and Son* links him to colonial trade. While this act does not literally lead to his death, they are connected in the sense that Paul’s death denies his father the dream of continuing the multi-generational tradition of *Dombey and Son*. By paralleling this connection paralleled with Paul’s conversation with Florence implies that Paul’s death is metaphorically the result of his associations with the empire. The death of a primary character heightens the anxiety that the novel initiated by linking the sea and the colonial world with death. The death of Paul subtly blames the colonial trade and thereby posits the possibility that Mr. Dombey and his imperialist business might be to blame.

Though “the earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in,” unfortunately Paul cannot survive his imperial role (12). This anxiety that Paul’s death raises about the impact of colonialism should continue to surface in the text as colonial guilt. However, it is covered over by the increased friction that Paul’s death brings between Florence and her father. Suddenly Paul’s death is not about Paul, but about the home he leaves behind. On his deathbed he can see the river and feels the waves bringing him closer to the sea, or toward the edges of the empire and death. He makes the connection between the foreign and death explicit. However, rather than making anything of this, the chapter closes after Paul’s death with Miss Tox’s reference to the imperial wealth of *Dombey and Son* saying “Dear me, dear me! To think... that Dombey and

Son should be a Daughter after all” (253). This passage extracts the anxiety over imperialism and displaces it onto the domestic sphere where the daughter dwells.

Dickens’s representation of the effects of colonialism, such as the deaths of the people aboard the *Charming Sally*, the banishment of Walter, and the displacement of Master Blitherstone’s family in India, challenges the validity of colonial involvement through these examples of anxiety about the foreign infringing on the domestic. Contradictorily, the text also ignores the role of Britain imperialists in colonialism by not making Dombey aware of the *Charming Sally*, by bringing Walter back alive, and by refocusing any concern about Master Blitherstone’s loneliness on Florence’s and Paul’s relationship. In these examples the narrator specifically focuses on the wellbeing of the domestic sphere in light of the anxieties they present, rather than the people who are exploited in order to finance the British domestic sphere. Thus, Dickens refocuses this quasi-expose of the injustice of colonialism and the ramifications for the colonized toward the morality of the English at the center of the empire and the threat of the crumbling English domestic space. In fact, the Dombey home literally does crumble from “[t]he passive desolation of disuse” when the “[k]eys rusted in the locks of doors.... Mildew and mould began to lurk in closets.... Fragments of mortar lost their hold upon the insides of the unused chimneys, and came dropping down” (350-2). Mr. Dombey’s neglect of and lack of interest in his home and his distrust of the women in his life cause this infection and decay. Earlier, he was careful to guard his son from the feminine affections of his nurse Richards and now he scorns Florence’s attempts to care for him. His actions and the psychology behind them are supposed to make him the antagonist for most of the novel. His primary interests, of course, revolve around his firm, which makes its money through colonial merchandise and industrial development.

Once his son dies, crippling his business plan for the future, the domestic space he neglects becomes “the miserable house” and “a place of agony” for Florence and Dombey (274).

Importantly, Dombey’s failure is not blamed on his business mistakes, but on his failures at home. This is particularly evident in his treatment of Florence. His behavior toward her has always been cold, particularly since the death of her mother. His consistent neglect is a form of slow violence that develops throughout the novel. Susan Nipper claims that there is no place for daughters in the Dombey house: “girls are thrown away in this house” (38). Dombey is so repulsed by his daughter that the mere mention of her name by Mr. Carker to Mr. Dombey causes “angry thoughts in reference to poor Florence [that] brooded and bred in Mr. Dombey’s breast, usurping the place of the cold dislike that generally reigned there” (402). The association of his unacknowledged grief with his daughter transforms his conception of her: “his previous feeling of indifference towards little Florence changed into an uneasiness of an extraordinary kind” (42).¹² He even describes her as being able to touch a “jarring and discordant string within him,” signifying that she is a trigger that reminds him of his loss. When his son dies his discomfort with Florence turns into resentment and abhorrence. He closes himself off from these memories and shuts himself up within his room where “the door was ever closed” (276). The door not only blocks out or represses the places that remind him of his son and his lost hope for Dombey and Son, but also the embodiment of his memories in his daughter. She leans up against the closed door,

...in the yearning of her love... to listen even for his breath; and in her one
absorbing wish to be allowed to show him some affection, to be a consolation to

¹² Additionally, I would note that part of the discomfort between Dombey and his daughter is gender based. As Susan Nipper notes, girls are “thrown away” in this house, particularly ones who serve no part in the reproduction of heirs.

him, to win him over to the endurance of some tenderness from her, his solitary child, she would have knelt down at his feet, if she had dared, in humble supplication. (276)

Instead, her father abuses her through his neglect, leaving her “alone in the deserted house, and day succeeded day, and still she lived alone” (355). Even observers pity her situation, as a mother tells her child “your misfortune is a lighter one than Florence’s; for not an orphan in the wide world can be so deserted as the child who is an outcast from a living parent’s love” (381). In this way, Dombey the businessman and imperialist is represented as Dombey, the abusive father.

These allegations, while severe, are never overtly connected with Dombey’s colonial infractions, but only implicitly through his neglect of Florence and their home in favor of the firm. While this does not disregard his lack of empathy for the people who die (or toil) for his work (the Charming Sally), it downplays the wickedness of his work as an imperialist.¹³ Nevertheless, Dombey’s expulsion of Walter into the unknown colonial world as punishment for his friendship with Florence and his association with Paul’s death would indicate that the world that Dombey operates in is a dangerous one and that his imperialist hands are dirty with Walter’s blood. Death is assumed for those who walk outside the center of the empire, which indicates an apprehension both about the colonies abroad and the possible insidiousness of Dombey’s business at home. Nonetheless, these anxieties are represented primarily in Dombey’s crumbling household, not his Imperial business. And yet, this emphasis on his home fails to fully erase the apparent anxiety of this text toward the outside world in instances such as in Paul’s references to

¹³ The trains in this novel are portrayed as monstrous and yet, they are not overtly connected with Dombey either. They would have been a necessary part of Dombey’s business between England and the colonies, but this connection is made invisible in the text.

the sea and its connection with death; the description of the East India Company's building and the objects outside it; the Charming Sally; and Major Bagstock's treatment of his servant. While Mr. Dombey's crumbling house overshadows his infractions as an imperialist, these remaining colonial anxieties are displaced onto the domestic sphere, making it a location of abuse and horror, particularly for Florence.

Dombey's most overt abuse in the domestic sphere comes when he beats his daughter in response to his second wife Edith's departure: "in his frenzy, he lifted up his cruel arm and struck her, crosswise, with that heaviness, that she tottered on the marble floor; and as he dealt the blow, he told her what Edith was [a whore], and bade her [Florence] follow her, since they had always been in league" (721). First, Dombey punishes Edith for resisting his authority and secondly for pursuing a separation from their marriage. Her actions anger him because they humiliate him as a business leader and public figure, not because he loves her or values her presence. By striking Florence, Dombey displaces his anxiety about public humiliation onto the most consistent domestic figure in the novel. He drives her from the house, turning her home into a threatening place rather than simply a decaying one. In fact, Dombey has made the home so dangerous that Captain Cuttle and Walter carefully keep Florence's location secret from her relatives, only telling Mr. Toots when they are sure that he is trustworthy (760).

After being struck by her father, Florence's hands tremble, but "she did not weep; she did not utter one word of reproach" (721). She responds with a degree of numbness and avoidance, behaviors often indicative of trauma since trauma is an inability to process an experience. Mr. Dombey's strike disrupts Florence's hope of being loved by him and instead she sees "his cruelty, neglect, and hatred, dominant above it, and stamping [her fondness for him] down" (721). In fact, this moment disrupts her identity as a Dombey. She claims that she has no father

and is an orphan. Likewise, Mrs. Chick “moan[s] over degenerate Dombey, who are no Dombey” (773). Mrs. Chick’s response indicates that Florence’s absence threatens the domesticity of the Dombey household just as homelessness threatens Florence. Her traumatization and the destruction of the Dombey home is a domestic crisis, which looms over the whole plot of the novel and is necessary to elude colonial anxiety and guilt.

Sigmund Freud referred to the internalization of a traumatic event as melancholia, or “pathological mourning” in “Mourning and Melancholia.” He claimed that when an attachment that is both strong in its affection as well as hostile is broken, the subject will internalize the lost object or draw it into her or his ego, rather than replacing the lost object as is done in mourning. The ego becomes the object, or is considered “the forsaken object.” What initially was “an object-loss,” or a form of mourning, becomes part of the melancholic individual as “an ego-loss” and the melancholic individual possesses or embodies the internalized loss (Freud 586-7). Florence’s previous attachment to her father was passionate on her side and hostile on his. Therefore, when he breaks that relationship and drives her and her stepmother from their home, Florence internalizes the loss, meaning she makes it a part of her as she attempts to reject it: “she fled from the idea of him as she had fled from the reality, and he was utterly gone and lost. There was no such Being in the world” (736). She not only runs away from him, but also attempts to run away from the memory of his abuse; however, escape is impossible.

If Florence carries her experiences within, then it naturally follows that those experiences will continue to manifest themselves over time. According to Dominic LaCapra, experience of trauma refuses to remain in the past. The traumatic experience continues to pervade the individual’s life, just as it does in Freud’s melancholia and the internalized “ego-loss.” LaCapra claims that trauma “is an out-of-context experience that upsets expectations and unsettles one’s

very understanding of existing contexts” (117). Therefore, trauma is a constant part of how the traumatized experience life. When Florence looks in the mirror following her escape from home, she sees the bruise her father left and both “knew – in a moment,” and “shunned it instantly – that on her breast there was the darkening mark of an angry hand.... Her tears burst forth afresh at the sight; she was ashamed and afraid of it” (736). The bruise is a material reminder to Florence of her father’s blow. However, the blow is also a reminder of the accumulated pain she has experienced within the Dombey home and the immediate violence that has finally driven her away.

As Florence sits with Captain Cuttle and thinks about Walter, the narrator carefully indicates that she most definitely is *not* thinking about her father as well. However, the narrator continues to articulate that Florence no longer desires her father’s love and clarifies that she is not thinking about the time her father hit her, thoughts that were “so appalling to her, that she covered her eyes, and shrunk trembling from the least remembrance of the deed, or of the cruel hand that did it” (743). In other words, she remembers not to remember being hit. However, traumatic memories reemerge unbidden. This violent recollection does not simply bring up bad memories, but brings up psychosomatic responses that link the condition of the mind to the responses of the body. Florence wrings her hands, weeps, and faints (724). She sleeps “uneasy in mind and body” (734). These responses to the events leading up to her beating and expulsion from home parallel Jill Matus’s definition of Victorian shock, in which symptoms of the mind and the body are linked to the experience of some event and its aftermath (3, 15, 21).¹⁴

Florence’s heart “was filled with a wild dread that fled from all confronting with its shattered

¹⁴ Jill Matus posits shock as an early representation of trauma and claims that trauma is timeless due to the contradictory nature of its definition as well as its characteristic ahistoricism. She defends this sense of timelessness in contradiction to Ruth Leys in order to make a claim for studying pre-Freudian trauma theory.

fragments.” She experiences severe anxiety at the thought of confronting her memories of her father and home. The narrator even goes so far as to describe those memories as “shattered fragments.” The experience of trauma defies linear time and Matus suggests that its presence in fiction appears as a “narrative rupture occasioned by those fictional occasions of not being oneself” (Matus 3). Therefore, we can read Florence’s need to avoid the “shattered fragments” of her experience as a representation of domestic trauma that dominates the plot of this novel first through slow violence and finally erupting in the beating. Dickens’s emphasis on Florence as a traumatized daughter focuses the concern of the novel on the endangered domestic sphere, displacing concern about the foreign or the empire onto the concerns of the home (743).

When Florence escapes her father’s abuse, she arrives at another broken and collapsed home. The original inhabitants, Solomon Gills and Walter, are both gone. They are assumed to be dead after Walter was sent out into the empire and Uncle Sol went after him. Florence has lost Walter to the sea, and metaphorically lost her mother and brother to the sea that separates Britain from its colonies. Captain Cuttle becomes Florence’s only family as a surrogate paternal figure. Florence mourns Walter’s supposed death at sea in silence and Captain Cuttle takes up the repetition of “And he’s drowned... And Wal’r’s drowned” as a “curious source of consolation” (738). The curiosity of the Captain’s repetition as a way of coping reveals his discomfort about Walter’s involvement with Dombey’s colonial enterprises. Walter’s life was risked for Dombey’s firm. Amidst her despair for both her father’s blow and for Walter, Florence responds by imagining healing from her traumatic experiences by constructing a fictional family to join:

She had indistinct dreams of finding, a long way off, some little sisters to instruct, who would be gentle with her and to whom, under some feigned name she might

attach herself, and who would grow up in their happy home, and marry, and be good to their old governess, and perhaps intrust her, in time, with the education of their own daughters. (736)

This solution posits a fantasy domestic life as a healing tool for grievous wrongs that come at the expense of both colonial expansion and domestic violence. Surprisingly though, this dream occurs “a long way off,” which might suggest the colonies across the sea. Whether Florence is suggesting she move abroad or not is insignificant in light of what this says about her own home life. The home she left was funded by the colonial trade of Dombey and Son and as a result is an anti-home that has hurt Florence through forms of slow violence, but specifically immediate abuse. Additionally, Walter fulfills Florence’s dream when he returns alive and proposes to Florence. Her weeping and fainting subside and she begins a happy new life, no longer a Dombey, but as Florence Gay. The world beyond England no longer poses a threat since Florence, the object of domestic and colonial violence, has a new family. Florence is able to travel at sea with Walter without fear or death. Furthermore, her identity as a wife and a mother eventually bring her together with her father so she, the displacer of colonial guilt, can heal his grief-stricken mind.

Unfortunately, Florence is not the only character in this novel to suffer physical abuse. Deirdre David claims that of the two characters beaten in *Dombey and Son*, “the Native is struck because he is dark-skinned and Florence is struck because she is female” (64). While neither beating goes unpunished, David makes the distinction that in the novel “it is explicitly not acceptable for a British father to hit his middle-class daughter but implicitly acceptable for a retired Indian army officer to beat his dark servant” and furthermore states that this “speaks directly to Dickens’s complex and unhappy view of empire” (66). Dickens does not condone

Major Bagstock's beating of his servant, but he does diminish it next to the unarguably wrong beating of Florence. When read through the lens of the empire, Major Bagstock's continual but comic beating of his servant is indecorous, but not necessarily a grievous breach of human rights. As David points out, "[t]he blow delivered to an innocent Victorian daughter exposes her father's domestic wickedness so vividly that his wickedness in the public sphere is dimmed (but not entirely blotted out) by her suffering and forgiveness" (67). Mr. Dombey's and Major Bagstock's roles as imperialists are ignored in favor of the father's unjust treatment of Florence. By prioritizing Mr. Dombey's actions in the domestic as more important than those he does in public as an imperialist, Dickens displaces imperial anxiety onto the domestic. This implies that Dickens is cognizant of imperial exploitation, but his inscription of anxiety onto the domestic belies any solution and rather articulates fear that the imperial ties of Britain are destroying the central fabric of Englishness. Dickens's *Dombey and Son* represents slow violence through Dombey's neglect of Florence and the crumbling of the Dombey home itself. This slow violence reaches its pinnacle or climax when Dombey hits his daughter. Just as David parallels the Native and Florence to reveal the power at work colonialist politics, I parallel their experiences to expose how slow violence works as a tool of colonialism so that it is devastating in the long run, but normalized as part of the everyday. The repetitive beatings, the Native's no-name status, and the lack of pathos toward the Native in the narration all accumulate as a chain of slow violence rather than being treated as forms of immediate violence. There is no climax for the Native in this novel and as a result, there is no resolution.¹⁵ The postcolonial world suffers the trauma of

¹⁵ However, in real life we might consider the significance of the Indian Mutiny in 1857, less than a decade after this book was published.

years of accumulated abuse, dating back beyond the Native.¹⁶ Major Bagstock's and the narrator's treatment of the Native are representative of the chain of slow violence is invisible due to the magnitude of the violence occurring in domestic spaces.

When Mr. Dombey's business has failed, he remains cloistered within his house with his memories of "the stain of his domestic shame" (904). The narrator specifically attaches "the ghostly, memory-haunted twilight" to a specific room of the house, which places all his grief on the Dombey home, saying "[l]et him remember it in that room, years to come" (904). In this way, Dickens articulates Mr. Dombey's failure as predominantly domestic in terms of his abuse of his family, as well as where he is confined to suffer his guilt as a consequence. As he sits alone he realizes that when everything in his life (son, wife, friend, money) had left him, Florence had remained unchanged, despite being the one who suffered most at his hand, and this "was the sharp grief of his soul" (904). His mind and body begin to crumble within his home, as his home once crumbled at his neglect. He wanders his house considering killing himself to end the guilt and grief of his memories, such as his domestic abuse of Florence and his abuse of Walter through his colonial power.

He talks about his reflection in the mirror walking to and fro as if it is an entity separate from him. This is a technique also used in Dickens's "The Haunted Man" in which grievous memories haunt Professor Redlaw in the visage of a ghost.¹⁷ Dombey is a man haunted by his past, but Dickens clearly articulates that Dombey feels guilt for the home he neglected and then destroyed, not his participation in colonial conquest. Dombey's domestic guilt causes him to

¹⁶ In their introduction to a themed issue of *Studies in the Novel*, Stef Craps and Gert Buelens claim that postcolonial trauma novels represent trauma as the result of violent acts and structural forms of degradation.

¹⁷ In Charles Dickens's "The Haunted Man," the ghost follows Redlaw everywhere and erases everyone's memories of pain and grief that Redlaw encounters. Unfortunately, the results are devastating and the ghost's gift of relief becomes a curse.

dissociate and leads him into a dream-like state with violent images of blood before him. Furthermore, the fact that this experience takes place within the home perpetuates the anxiety about the crumbling of the English home. He thinks about the pools of blood that would creep out beneath the door if he killed himself and how feet would track his blood throughout the house (910). He thinks that for the blood “to leak out into the hall, it must be a long time going so far” (909). This dream of Dombey’s blood spreading throughout the house recalls the violence he has done in his home and his current atonement through grieving. However, it is also reminiscent of the metaphorical blood on Dombey’s hands as a result of his participation in imperial trade, such as his expulsion of Walter, and the distance of the blood “going so far” to finally be recognized in his home at this moment.

During these reflections Florence returns to him in a “gleam of light.” She nurtures him, but even with their reunion he is still “shattered in mind, and perilously sick in body” (928). He goes in and out of dream states, sometimes unable to recognize Florence. In these states he once again sees the bloody footsteps tracking his blood amongst other feet. He looks at his own hand, that struck Florence and signed Walter’s sailing orders, and “he marked how wicked and murderous that hand looked,” signifying the guilt he feels for all the inhumane things that hand has done in the empire and in domestic spheres (910). In this scene the feet that carry Dombey’s blood join others and walk out into the streets, meaning that Dombey’s spilt blood would atone for sins both inside and outside his home. Other people’s blood meets his everywhere and now his suffering connects him with the outside world, a world that he exploited for profit. However, Florence pulls her father out of this altered state of consciousness. And rather than feeling guilt for sending Walter abroad, watching the Major beat his servant, running a firm that profits from the risks and exploitations of colonial trade, Dombey’s mental peril allows him to feel guilt for

his domestic violence. As a result, the blood that might have been shed for the atonement of Dombey's imperialism is appropriated in order to resolve the violence against Florence.

Ultimately, Dombey's mind heals and his conscience is soothed through his participation in Florence and Walter's domestic space. In this new home, Dombey's ability to love and care for his grandchildren, particularly little Florence, allows the novel to repair the domestic unrest and show the harmony of a happy home. However, this solution further displaces any opportunity to deal with the position of the Native or the perpetuation of colonial exploitation at the hands of Walter, the new paternal imperialist. Any anxiety over Walter's new role is displaced by his kindness as a husband and father. Therefore, the everyday accumulates under the kind smiles of Walter, the new paternal imperialist. This form of displacement ignores colonial guilt in favor of domestic trauma and continues to perpetuate slow violence, a form of naturalized acts and practices, that will accumulate as its own form of devastating brutality.

In addition to the novel's concern over Dombey's firm, there are other indirect forms of violence that come as the result of Dombey's trade in the colonial world. For instance, the railroad would have predominantly been used (as it is today) for the transportation of goods, rather than of people. In fact, the railroad would have been crucial to the development of Dombey and Son because it would have been responsible for the transportation of goods to and from the sea. In the novel, we are very much aware of the ways that the sea threatens the English home by metaphorically claiming Fanny Dombey, Master Paul, and literally taking Walter and Uncle Sol away; we might assume that these threats also extend to the integrity of Englishness, connecting England with its larger empire. However, the railroad makes these voyages possible and profitable and necessitates further industrialization. Therefore, Dickens's representation of the railroad, as part of the trade of Dombey and Son, was dangerous to the English domestic and

yet unstoppable because of the British empire. Dickens describes this tool of empire as a devil, “thundering along so smoothly” (839). This is particularly evident when the railroad consumes Staggs’s Garden, erasing the happy home of Richards and her family. The narrator says that Staggs’s Gardens “had vanished from the earth” and now “granite columns of gigantic girth opened a vista to the railway world beyond” (244). Now there are passengers swarming the streets and “vehicles of every kind” and “[the] carcasses of houses, and beginnings of new thoroughfares, had started off upon the line at steam’s own speed, and shot away into the country in a monster train” (245). Even though the poor home of Richards stood amongst “old rotten summer-houses,” the current homes are described as carcasses or shells of homes killed by the presence of the railroad. While some might consider the rush of business as positive progress for the community, Dickens represents the presence of the railroad and commerce as a violent and destructive.

The violence of the railroad is also evident in Carker’s close encounters with and eventual death in the jaws of the railroad. As Carker walks near the tracks he senses “A trembling of the ground, and quick vibration in his ears; a distant shriek; a dull light advancing,” and he describes the train as it looks at him with “two red eyes, and a fierce fire, dropping glowing coals” (840). Carker’s final encounter with the train is presented as an attack. The train approaches with its “red eyes, bleared and dim, in the daylight,” and Carker is “beaten down, caught up, and whirled away upon a jagged mill that spun him round and round, and struck him limb from limb,” and like a beast it “licked his stream of life up with its fiery heat, and cast his mutilated fragments in the air... and soaked his blood up, with a train of ashes” (842). In this passage, the train is given agency as it beats Carker, licks his stream of life, and soaks up his blood. In combination with the description of the train as a monster in Staggs’s Garden, this

image reveals Dickens's anxiety about the power the railroad possesses.¹⁸ This is one of the larger colonial disruptions in this novel. The demands of the empire necessitate a "devil" machine like this one. However, the impact of this attack as a colonial threat is partially lost on readers because of the heinous crimes Carker has committed against the Dombey home. Mr. Dombey may have abused his daughter and tyrannized his wife, but Carker ran away with Edith Dombey and robbed Mr. Dombey of his fortune. This makes Carker into an even worse villain than Dombey the abuser and leads the audience to feel that his death is poetic justice. However, even given his crimes, Carker's death at the hand of the railway figures the empire he served as drastically and unimaginably violent and therefore an evil worse than Dombey or Carker.

According to Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay, the representation of the railroad not only enacts trauma in the killing of Carker, but its monstrosity belies representation (Dupeyron-Lafay 101-111, 14). Therefore, writers of the nineteenth-century, particularly Dickens, relied on an earlier form of literary representation, specifically the gothic, in order to convey the heightened levels of anxiety surrounding the railroad:

Both of Dickens's texts [*Dombey and Son* and *The Signal Man*] also rest on a paradox, however, because the railroad, a supposed symbol of modernity, resembles, through its effect on the reader, a brutal force coming from a distant and barbaric past, along the same lines as the savage urbanization of *London Going out of Town* by Cruikshank. Like him, Dickens makes use of a fantastical style in order to describe the ways that society was changing (industrialization, urbanization and its consequences, particularly the railroad). Chapter six of *Dombey and Son* (1848) shows, in a spirit close to that of the engraving, the large-

¹⁸ Dickens suffered from shock after a railroad crash. For more information see Jill Matus???

scale devastation provoked by the construction of the railroad, which shredded the urban tissue and annihilated a peaceful London neighborhood. (Dupeyron-Lafay102-3, translation mine).

This link between gothic representation and industrial forms of change further informs the aesthetics of sentiment in this novel, particularly in reference to domestic loss. The disturbing violence of the railroad parallels Dickens's treatment of grief and loss in the memories and consciousness of the characters, such as Florence. As the railroad infringes on the movement of the characters and threatens London homes, its ability to shred the urban tissue mimics the resurgence of loss and the memories of loss that continue to haunt the characters. Furthermore, these repetitive representations of loss primarily affect the domestic with the erasure of Staggs's Garden, which occurs as Master Paul lies on his deathbed, and the scandalous flight of Edith Dombey and Carker. Carker's death by the railroad also represents an imperial loss since he is an imperial stand-in for Dombey in both business and death. As a result, his death represents both justice for Dombey's broken home in the domestic sphere and a growing fear that Britain has lost control of its imperial tools. After all, the railroad has the capacity to execute Carker and swallow up Staggs's Garden. According to this novel, the business of the empire is not under the control of the businessmen anymore and therefore has the potential to destroy rather than improve the English nation.

Dickens uses his narrator to verbalize that the degradation of the home is the source of social problems in order to avoid blaming colonial trade or government structures. Before Edith leaves Mr. Dombey, the narrator draws the novel outward to consider what problems are "poisonous to health and life" and comes to the conclusion:

...we stand appalled to know, that where we generate disease to strike our children down and entail itself on unborn generations, there also we breed, by the same certain process infancy that knows no innocence, youth without modesty or shame, maturity that is mature in nothing but in suffering and guilt, blasted old age that is a scandal on the form we bear. Unnatural humanity! (701)

This suggests that the biggest threats to humanity are bred and acculturated in the home. The everyday of the English household has the power to “generate disease” and breed “maturity that is mature in nothing but in suffering and guilt,” as we see happen in the Dombey home. The narrator’s claim that violence originates in the home indicates that the placement of guilt on domestic places stands in for the novel’s developing scandal of business and concurrent regret for the state of world affairs.

Naturally, the narrator’s solution also begins in the home. After discussing the infection of figurative (and possibly literal) disease within the home, the narrator suggests:

...a good spirit who would take the house-tops off... and show a Christian people what dark shapes issue from amidst their homes.... For only one night’s view of the pale phantoms rising from the scenes of our too-long neglect... raining the tremendous social retributions which are ever pouring down, and ever coming thicker! Bright and blest the morning that should rise on such a night for men, delayed no more by stumbling-blocks of their own making... would then apply themselves... owning one duty to the Father of one family, and tending to one common end, to make the world a better place!” (702)

For Dickens, the evil plaguing society comes from the home. Therefore, the logical solution should come from the home as well. The problem with this solution is that it makes no pretence

of addressing “social retributions” or the “scandal” that haunts British society and history. This scandal is not even given a name in this passage, despite the fact that the main character and antagonist, Dombey, is an imperialist. The haunting of colonialism is so disturbing and tenuous to British society that is intentionally denied as a problem that requires a solution, relying instead on the domestic as a battleground at which to defend the English way of life.

Mothers and the Domestic Clutter of Empire in *Bleak House*

In *Dombey and Son*, Dickens displaces colonial guilt onto domestic spaces through the representation of domestic trauma. Three years after the completion of this novel, Dickens began publishing the serialized edition of *Bleak House*, which deals with the anxiety of London surrounding the Court of the Chancery and the lengthy fictional court case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Like *Dombey and Son*, this anxiety displaces colonial guilt onto the domestic sphere; however, this displacement is achieved through the consumption of the empire in the home and the success or failure of the domestic figure. Unlike *Dombey and Son*, this novel is particularly concerned with homes and mothers and how the British empire impacts their roles within intimate domestic spaces. In *Dombey and Son*, the father is critiqued as a nexus at which the violence from the empire and the violence of the home converge. However, the mothers in *Bleak House* are not overt imperialists, like Dombey. In contrast, they are the tasteful decorators of the home, the subjects of fashion, and philanthropic advocates for those in need. These characteristics are particularly visible in Mrs. Jellyby, Mrs. Pardiggle, Lady Dedlock, and Esther Summerson; however, only Esther Summerson is successful as a maternal and domestic figure. Significantly, like Florence Dombey, Esther Summerson represents both the ideal domestic figure and the object of domestic trauma. The anxiety surrounding imperial discourse in these texts, which includes industrialization and consumerism, is displaced onto the domestic realms of the home and the English nation in relation to the foreign. As a result, imperial guilt is disguised as domestic clutter in order to reveal and deal with domestic trauma.

Consumption of objects from the empire is a daily part of life for the characters of *Bleak House*. As a law-writer, Mr. Snagsby uses India-rubber (154). Mr. Tulkinghorn rests his feet on

a “thick and dingy Turkey-carpet” (159). Bleak House, the home of Mr. Jarndyce, is tastefully decorated with objects, such as “a Native-Hindoo chair, which was also a sofa, a box, and a bedstead, and looked, in every form, something between a bamboo skeleton and a great bird-cage, and had been brought from India nobody knew by whom or when” (86). Of course, this chair comes from the same country from which Major Bagstock imported his servant, the native. As with the native, we know little about the chair’s past, only that it comes from India. While the chair is not a person with human rights, it was manufactured elsewhere with resources that are available to English production and consumption because of British imperial conquest. Furthermore, it is important to note that “nobody knew by whom or when” the chair came to be in Bleak House. This object, taken from India and juxtaposed with images of the English domestic in the British home, takes on a timeless, placeless quality that belies representation of colonial violence, while also alluding to the qualities of taste and comfort reaped by the exploits of colonialism. Homes that juxtapose the empire with the English domestic create a domestic clutter that is metaphorically representative of the intersections of colonial violence and domestic violence. Thus, this domestic union is then seen as the problem of domestic spaces, rather than a problem that also comes from the edges of the empire.

In the sitting room of Bleak House, the paintings on the wall disjointedly interact with each other and normalize the cohabitation of empire and domestic spaces when used as tasteful decorations. The narrator describes “numbers of surprising and surprised birds, staring out of pictures at real trout in a case, as brown and shining as if it had been served with gravy; at the death of Captain Cook; and at the whole process of preparing tea in China, as depicted by

Chinese artists” (86).¹⁹ The image of Captain Cook’s death refers the killing of a British explorer at the hands of Hawaiians and thereby alludes to the threat of the foreign against the British. Next to this dramatic image of violence are real trout, domestic to England, encased in glass and a Chinese tea rendered by Chinese artists. The very walls and rooms of Bleak House display objects from India, the Pacific, and China as decoration. Nicola Bradbury refers to the commingling of these objects as “the domestic clutter of the British Empire” (1018). In fact, the surprised and surprising birds reveal a degree of anxiety and discomfort about the commingling of the objects of the empire and the objects of the English domestic, making the home an uncomfortable and violent space through the domestic clutter of the empire. And yet, Esther contradicts the birds’ surprise by describing the irregularities of Bleak House as pleasant and delightful (86). The house acquires this sense of comfort and taste by appropriating these objects; transforming them into the timeless everyday items of a proper and tasteful home; and deflating them of overt symbolic meaning. On the wall, they are the decorations of an English home that do not represent a particular country or origin. Through trade they become consumable objects.²⁰ These objects, juxtaposed with English domestic objects, make the home a sight of violence where shocked birds watch the incompatible combination of a dead fish (without gravy), a bloody assault in Hawaii, and a Chinese tea ceremony.

Of course, the homemaker of Bleak House, a place that consumes the objects of colonial conquest and empties them of meaning by making them into domestic clutter, is Esther. She represents the ideal domestic figure or angel in the house. Due to Esther’s housewifely and

¹⁹ Tea played a significance role in the trade of the empire, which I will address in connection with Esther’s illness.

²⁰ Furthermore, buying and trading household objects is subtly indicative of the British Empire’s ownership of countries, regulation of trade, exploitation of natives, slave trade, and degradation of environments.

motherly qualities, Mr. Jarndyce tells her “[you] are clever enough to be the good little woman of our lives” and grants her authority throughout his house (121). Esther says that this comment from her guardian initiated her pet names “Old Woman, and Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs. Shipton, and Mother Hubbard, and Dame Durden, and so many names of that sort” (121). All of her companions at Bleak House acknowledge her as the homemaker and mother figure and give her these nicknames to signify their beliefs. For instance, Cobweb comes from William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Cobweb is the caregiver of the four fairies sent by Titania to guide Bottom. Bottom says “if I cut my finger, I shall make bold with you,” meaning that if he gets hurt, Cobweb can heal him (III.i.170). Additionally, Mother Hubbard and Mrs. Shipton are old women from English nursery rhymes and fairy tales. Mrs. Shipton is particularly notorious for her ugly face and her prophetic wisdom. These nicknames desexualize Esther and represent her as the matronly housekeeper, rather than as a figure of romance or fashion in this novel. Moreover, the reference to the disfigured Mrs. Shipton foreshadows and Esther’s disfigurement after her severe illness. In this way, these nicknames and even the illness that disfigures Esther position her as a figure of English rhymes and fairy tales and thereby the epitome of Englishness, particularly the English domestic sphere.

While Esther is an exemplary mother figure as well as representative of the English domestic sphere, she also carries trauma from her childhood. Her trauma signifies that the family and the home possess their own violence, which combines with the colonial violence represented by colonial objects to create the clutter of the home. Part of Esther’s childhood pain is the result of being raised as an orphan. Unfortunately, we do not learn very much about her experiences. As one of the two narrators, Esther controls the amount of information that we receive about her childhood. The glimpses she does give come in abrupt interruptions. For

instance, after Mr. Guppy proposes to Esther and she refuses him, she says that first she laughs and then she cries and experiences feelings similar to the burial of her doll (154). This reference to her aunt burying her doll comes as a flashback within the context of the narration and is a modest suggestion of the emotional abuse that Esther suffered at the hands of her aunt.

Esther suffers other flashbacks of memories from her childhood and experiences pain as she remembers. For instance, when she encounters Lady Dedlock during a rainstorm, she says that “[the] beating at my heart came back again. I had never heard the voice, as I had never seen the face, but it affected me in the same strange way. Again, in a moment, there arose before my mind innumerable pictures of myself” (296). Esther has no memory of Lady Dedlock’s name or face, but she claims that it affects her, possibly on a subconscious level. In fact, Lady Dedlock’s face and voice bring “innumerable pictures” of Esther’s childhood to the forefront of her mind. Esther also indicates that she has felt this way before, indicating, as does Florence, that she carries with her the unbidden memories from a troubling past. Yet, while Florence acknowledges and then denies the trauma of her home life, Esther represses it and only allows her traumatic past to enter the narration through abrupt interruptions, flashbacks, and obscure reflections. Esther vaguely describes her feelings as strange. When Lady Dedlock asks if she frightened Esther, Esther thinks “No. It was not fright. Why should I be frightened!” (296). However, there is a thunderstorm raging around her. Fear would be a natural response to her current position. The irony of her response implies that Esther is overwhelmed by a strange kind of fear, even if she refuses to acknowledge it. Importantly, before she encounters Lady Dedlock, the strip of land they explore is metaphorically linked to the English colonies. They observe the views before them as would an explorer in unfamiliar territory, which Esther describes as getting “a glimpse of the better land” (295). Additionally, Esther says that all week the weather has

been “extremely sultry” which calls up the hot and humid climate of the colonies that strongly contrasts with English weather (295). As the storm begins, the sultry climate and the view of new land is disrupted and forced into shelter. The language of this passage recalls the expansion of colonial conquest, as if Ada and Esther are searching for new territory, and the sultry weather alludes to British colonies with similar climates, such as India. Esther’s subsequent interaction with Lady Dedlock forces Esther’s history of domestic trauma and the metaphorical experience of empire and its sultry climate under the same roof. Although Esther interprets her experience of discomfort as purely domestic, the language suggests both home and empire. The storm forces both the colonial and the domestic metaphorically into the home and any concern or guilt for the colonies abroad, with their sultry climates, is deflected and displaced as a domestic problem.

Not long after the third person narrator indicates that Esther is, in fact, Lady Dedlock’s child Esther becomes violently ill. Because Esther is one of the two narrators of this novel, Esther’s severe illness disrupts the narration of the novel. In this way, not only does illness disfigure Esther, it violently cuts her narration out of the novel for a fairly substantial period of time. However, this disruption makes Esther’s thoughts even more important when she does resume her narration. Her illness takes her through flashbacks and delusions (555-6). As Esther recounts the “agony and misery” of her illness through her subsequent mental clarity, she wonders if saying less about being ill will help her think even more clearly. This would indicate that the unbidden memories that returned to her during her illness and the severity of the pain she felt when she was sick still haunt her. Esther’s origins become a focal point for the reader as both a scandalous point of interest and a desire for Esther’s wellbeing. As the ideal domestic figure her pain symbolizes a threat to domestic spaces. This threat is particularly evident

between public and private spheres, but metaphorically between the English nation and its colonies. After all, Esther's first face-to-face interaction with her mother was in sultry weather under an English roof. The repression of her painful memories is a survival tactic to protect an already twice-threatened figure. If she figuratively represents the epitome of both Englishness and the home, then focusing on the domestic is also a tactic for the English nation to avoid colonial guilt. However, this tactic does not assimilate neatly within the text. There is violence abroad, but as Esther hesitantly reveals, there is also violence in the home and the home synthesizes these two forms of violence so that domestic spaces of this novel are dark and violent. While this combination displaces the guilt of colonial violence it also forces Esther to forget the domestic grief in her past.

Thus, Esther questions the point of even remembering her past and her recent illness: "I do not recall them to make others unhappy, or because I am now the least unhappy in remembering them" (556). This quote reveals Esther's guilt at creating unhappiness as a result of communicating repressed memories of violence. As a survivor of domestic abuse, Esther carries an impossible²¹ past with her. She tries to forget her past as she tried to see the irregular colonial and domestic objects within Bleak House as pleasant and delightful. After all, when Bleak House, like the shelter Esther meets Lady Dedlock in, juxtaposes colonial violence and domestic violence it makes the home a violent and traumatizing place.

However, after Esther becomes well again her concern is her memory of the domestic violence of both her childhood and her illness. She concludes that "[it] may be that if we knew more of such strange afflictions, we might be better able to alleviate their intensity" (556). This

²¹ The adjective "impossible" is used by LaCapra, Caruth, and other trauma critics to express the degree of degradation brought on by an experience that cannot be assimilated and as a result is traumatizing, rather than the actual existence of the experience.

comment both imagines a world of research that Freud had not even begun to pioneer and suggests an attempt to talk through pain and trauma. While Esther is referring to her own suffering through illness, this discussion of “strange afflictions” seems reminiscent of the colonial objects throughout *Bleak House*, such as the paintings and the chair, whose origins are, like Esther’s, unknown and unmentioned. It also considers how much people knew about the extent of suffering at home and abroad as a result of colonialism. In *Dombey and Son*, Uncle Sol recognizes that people risked their lives transporting his wine to the East Indies and beyond. Nonetheless, as the disfigured housekeeper and the angel of the house, Esther’s trauma supersedes the histories of the objects around her. For instance, as Esther recovers she enjoys a cup of tea on “the pretty tea-table with its little delicacies to tempt me, and its white cloth, and its flowers” (557). The tea she drinks is a temptation and a treat. For readers, the tea would have been reminiscent of the recent end of the tea trade with China as a result of the Opium Wars between England and China from 1839 through 1860 and the rapid increase of the tea trade with India in 1838.²² The deaths of British and Chinese soldiers and the exploitation of Indian laborers are silenced in favor of Esther’s narrative of domestic violence and the comfort the tea brings her while she is healing. Similarly, Esther immediately notices that the usual clutter of her room has changed. The paintings are still in place, the furniture was moved while she was ill, but the looking glass was put away so that Esther would not see her scars. The narrative of domestic violence again supercedes the significance of the domestic clutter. Accordingly, rather than discuss the origins of the objects that decorate that home and the violence that led to their presence in the home, this text deals with a broken home. In this way, Esther’s traumatic

²² An article titled “Importation of Tea,” from *The Times* (London) on Friday, Feb 8, 1850, indicates the arrival of the largest importation of tea (14,000 packages) that ever occurred in one shipment to England (6).

experiences replace the anxiety raised by the pictures that line her wall, or even the looking glass that reflects her scared face after the illness.

In contrast to her daughter, Lady Dedlock belongs to the “world of fashion.” The narrator describes the world of fashion as a speck in comparison to the rest of the world. This situates the consumers of fashionable products from the empire as a small number compared to those who toil to produce them. While we might interpret this circle as the aristocracy and the wealthy, the narrator specifies that what is important about this community is the way they consume domestic and colonial objects. In fact, the narrator describes this form of consumption as morally informed:

There is much good in [the world of fashion]; there are many good and true people in it; it has its appointed place but the evil of it is, that it is a world wrapped up in too much jeweler’s cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them as they circle round the sun. It is a deadened world, and its growth is sometimes unhealthy for want of air. (20)

This passage indicates that the evil of the world of fashion, of which Lady Dedlock is a prominent member, is the over-consumption of imperial goods such as jewels and cotton, as well as domestic goods such as wool, which were produced in England. They become too “wrapped up” in these objects and “cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds,” such as the rest of the empire and its outlying colonies. Being “wrapped up” in these objects prevents those inside from seeing what circles the sun or what rushes past them. This is not unlike Dombey’s blindness to Florence throughout his imperialist ventures. For Dombey, the universe revolves around his business. Similarly, the language of this passage places the world of fashion at the center of this metaphorical solar system so that the other worlds are heard speeding past them in

an effort to make it around the sun. So while this passage condones blinding consumption, it also assumes the primacy of this world, denying any exploitative concerns with the use of these objects.

Despite being a figure of the fashionable world, Lady Dedlock is often “bored to death” (21). This is partly because she and Sir Leicester Dedlock are childless. Thus, though she may be at the height of the world of fashion, as a maternal figure she is significantly flawed. As far as she or anyone else knows, she has no children and her days are empty. While the narrator expresses anxiety over consumption of the empire through the world of fashion, that anxiety is displaced onto Lady Dedlock as a representation of failed domesticity. Thus, the narrative does not fault Lady Dedlock for being wrapped up in objects and ignoring their exploitative origins, but for abandoning her child, albeit ignorantly, and enjoying the objects of empire at her child’s expense. In fact, the narrator uses diamonds to reveal Lady Dedlock’s secret and scandalous motherhood.²³ When Mr. Guppy questions Lady Dedlock about her connection to Esther, he tells her about the “queer” tale of the lady who visited the anonymous Nemo’s grave and “the rings that sparkled on her fingers” (467). These sparkling rings come from the empire and are markers of wealth. The sparkling fingers “queer” the story because they do not belong at the graveside of an anonymous man.²⁴ Unlike in *Bleak House*, the jewelry cannot transform its meaning into part of the English aristocratic home because it is alongside the rot of death. Therefore this queer tale interrupts the blending of colonial objects with the English domestic sphere. Lady Dedlock’s jewelry is transformed from a representation of colonial violence and exploitation to a moral marker that reveals that she visited Nemo. Since Nemo was Lady Dedlock’s former lover, then

²³ Lady Dedlock gave birth out of wedlock. However, her sister told her the child died at birth.

²⁴ I do not intend to bring in queer theory as another theoretical lens. My point was simply to highlight the description of the tale as an oddity and mark Lady Dedlock’s actions as abnormal.

called Captain Hawdon, and the father of her child, the mention of her trip to his grave agitates her and makes the diamonds on her fingers sparkle. Mr. Guppy sees the “diamonds glittering on the hand that holds the screen. My Lady trifles with the screen, and makes them glitter more” (467). These diamonds are also aligned with the fan she “trifles with”; this time, instead of being inserted into the domestic trauma, these objects of imperial conquest hide Lady Dedlock’s face and screen her anxiety about discovery by Mr. Guppy.

When Lady Dedlock seeks out Esther to tell her that she is her mother, Esther responds to Lady Dedlock’s presence with a mix of shock and pain, similar to her earlier responses to Lady Dedlock. She says “I was rendered motionless... by a something in her face that I had pined for and dreamed of when I was a little child; something I had never seen in any face; something I had never seen in hers before” (578). This “something in her face,” is the look a mother gives her child, which Esther has never received from anyone before now, especially not from Lady Dedlock. She has encountered Lady Dedlock before and felt apprehension and repressed anxiety at the sound of her voice and the appearance of her face. The pattern of Esther’s repetition of the word “something” in her description of Lady Dedlock’s face implies that the “something” is referential. Her repetition of this word insinuates that she recognizes how her mother would look at her, as if drawing from forgotten memories or intuitive knowledge. However, she also clearly indicates that she has “never seen” that look before, especially from Lady Dedlock’s face. This reference to memories that have *never been* implies a depth of repressed memories and pain that led to this repression and that now resides beneath the narration’s consciousness. Even though Esther does not know what Lady Dedlock has come to tell her, she responds to these non-memories with “a dread and faintness” (578). She seems to undergo symptoms of severe shock and panic as she looks at Lady Dedlock: “I could not see her, I could not hear her, I could not

draw my breath. The beating of my heart was so violent and wild, that I felt as if my life were breaking from me” (579). Esther’s inability to see, hear, and breath indicate that she cannot process this new information. After her illness, she suggested that talking about “strange afflictions,” such as her illness and the memories it brought up, may help alleviate the suffering they cause. And yet, in this passage domestic trauma disables Esther’s ability to talk about pain. Rather, the reorganizing of her painful past is re-traumatizing. All this occurs outdoors near enough to Chesney Wold for Esther to view the Ghost’s Walk, a reminder of English domestic unrest.²⁵ She even imagines that she is the figure that haunts the steps. It is significant that she does not hear this news in her room. In *Bleak House*, she would have been surrounded by objects of colonial clutter and would have derived comfort and healing from consuming them, as she does with the tea. Instead, this scene occurs outside the home, where the domestic no longer metaphorically absorbs colonial objects. The outside world, literally and figuratively, is a dangerous place and the effect of Esther’s trauma is heightened by it.

Once again Esther’s thoughts go to the void her mother left. She considers the role that a mother, the domestic figure, should have. Her thoughts express an idealized prescription for motherhood and articulate the significance of her loss. Esther realizes that she “had never learned to love and recognize, had never been sung to sleep with, had never heard a blessing from, had never had a hope inspired by [her mother’s face]; [this] made an enduring impression on my memory” (582). Nonetheless, Esther rejects any form of blame she might assign to her mother. In fact, she blames herself for her mother’s and her aunt’s unhappiness. Her aunt’s words come to her in waves of memory returning to her “like a surge upon the shore... ‘Your mother, Esther, was your disgrace, and you are hers’” (584). In *Dombey and Son*, the sea

²⁵ The Ghost’s Walk dates back to the English Civil War.

represented the boundary between England and its colonies. It was also a dangerous place, where many characters went to disappear and even die. To have the sea “surge upon the shore” of Esther’s memory signifies her remembrance of the emotional abuse that she experienced, but it also represents the metaphorical rushing in of the undomesticated colonial world that lies beyond the seas around Britain. Hence, Esther experiences a rupture in her understanding of the world around her. Since she represents the ideal figure of the English domestic sphere, the colonial clutter around her should be under her control through the tasteful positioning of objects and paintings. While on the surface her anxiety derives from her knowledge of her mother and her worry that she might shame her, the text uses metaphorical colonial references in order to also position Esther’s anxiety against the approaching colonial world.

Esther experiences a surge of grief and confusion when she says that she “could not disentangle all that was about me; and I felt as if the blame and the shame were all in me, and the visitation had come down” (584). This passage indicates that Esther believes that she will suffer for her mother’s sins, as if from divine judgment, meaning that she has guilt for something that she has not done directly. As a result, her mother’s confession causes her to despise herself:

I felt as if I knew it would have been better and happier for many people, if indeed I had never breathed. That I had a terror of myself, as the danger and the possible disgrace of my own mother, and of a proud family name. That I was so confused and shaken, as to be possessed by a belief that it was right, and had been intended, that I should die in my birth; and that it was wrong, and not intended, that I should be then alive. (583)

At this moment, Esther has severe suicidal thoughts. While she expresses no intent to act on those thoughts, the consideration of herself as worthless indicates acute pain and in this case

trauma, as the result of emotional abuse throughout her childhood as well as the sudden realization of her origins. She attempts to avoid her own feelings of worthlessness and self-loathing, brought on by this form of domestic trauma, by saying “I ran from myself and everything” (586). Then, despite Esther’s role as caregiver and mother throughout this novel, the distress brought on by Lady Dedlock’s confession and the memories of her childhood trauma necessitate a reversal of Esther’s role as the domestic caregiver. Her little maid Charley provides the maternal comfort Esther now needs and cannot provide. Just as Charley nursed Esther back to health when she was ill, she now holds her, cries, kisses her face, and rocks her “to and fro like a child” (588). This passage emphasizes the severity of the trauma that Esther experiences as a result of Lady Dedlock’s failed maternal duties. It alludes to the approach of undomesticated colonial world through the approach of the metaphorical sea that “[surges] upon the shore” of Esther’s memory and brings back the hateful things her aunt would tell her. The threats of the colonial world become part of domestic spaces. The novel sublimates that threat beneath Esther’s trauma in order to avoid the guilt and fear of facing the exploitations of the British empire, focusing instead on the dire consequences of a broken home.

The resulting broken home from Lady Dedlock’s failed motherhood at least has objects of taste and fashion. Mr. Krook’s filthy rag and bottle shop exemplifies trade and consumption gone perverse, which, as in *Dombey and Son*, becomes more of a threat to the home than to the actual world of trade and commerce. Esther encounters his shop during a walk with Ada, Richard, and Caddy. They meet Miss Flite and she leads them to her lodging above Krook’s Rag and Bottle shop. The shop defies notions of trade since “everything seemed to be bought, and nothing to be sold there” (67). Instead the items accumulate one on top of the other catching dust and cobwebs. The neighborhood refers to Krook as the Lord Chancellor and to his shop as

the Court of Chancery, making his shop a microcosm of the Chancery, a powerful and corrupt group of judges and lawyers who exploit individuals like Miss Flite and Richard who are dependent on their judgments.²⁶ Observing old iron keys, bones, kitchen goods, and other items in Krook's shop, Esther links the shop to the court system by imagining the volumes as legal ones, the keys belonging to law offices, and the bones being those of diseased clients. While none of the objects are directly described as colonial, the profusion of items piled on top of one another in Krook's shop also recalls the images associated with the world of fashion, which described colonial and English goods wrapped up in other goods. This form of hoarding (and perverted consumerism) is reminiscent of the juxtaposition of objects in Bleak House and the tightly wrapped items in the world of fashion. And as perverted versions of already degraded spaces this shop becomes a particularly threatening place that, in the most horrifying scene of the book, bursts into flames when its owner spontaneously combusts.

All these material objects accumulating in Krook's shop degrade what should be the domestic space of Miss Flite and the late Nemo (Captain Hawdon). Hence their lodgings never become proper domestic homes for these characters; rather they seem to be places where they wait to die. The anonymous Nemo becomes less and less an individual as his identity slowly peels away in this place before he dies, leaving little record of his former life. In fact, Krook says that he would likely be better able to "describe the ladies whose heads of hair I have got in sacks down-stairs" than say more about Nemo's life (168). Nemo does leave letters behind that prove he was the father of Esther and the lover of Lady Dedlock. However, these letters are obscured for the majority of the novel by Krook and his accumulated objects. The letters as

²⁶ While the legal and government inefficiency is one of Dickens's major targets in this novel, I am focusing my study on the presence of colonialism and its interactions with the English domestic sphere.

objects represent a destroyed family unit (Captain Hawdon, Lady Dedlock, and Esther) and like other collections of objects in the novel, the objects in Krook's shop are a juxtaposition of colonial and English objects and represent colonial guilt for the owner's destroyed life. After all, Nemo, in his previous career as Captain Hawdon, traveled with the British military. As part of the British Army, that expanded and maintained Britain's empire, Hawdon's life and letters emanate from the institution he served. He lives in Krook's shop and after he dies, his body and letters (among few other belongings) fall into Krook's hands. The letters stay in the shop after Hawdon/Nemo's death as part of Krook's mundane piles. Hawdon's military career left Lady Dedlock pregnant out of wedlock, which eventually leads to Lady Dedlock's abandonment of Esther and the scandal that Lady Dedlock tries to avoid at two crucial periods of her life. Hawdon and his letters are the link between colonialism and the English domestic sphere. Therefore, here in Krook's shop, as elsewhere in the novel, the traces of colonial guilt are displaced onto the domestic.

While the perverted consumption of objects by the fashionable world and in Krook's shop provides insight into the integration of empire into domesticity, the displacement of colonial guilt onto the domestic is also evident in Dickens's perversion of English childhood in the character of Jo. The narrator distances Jo from the world of the Dedlocks and "good society" (256). The narrator claims that "[i]t must be a strange state to be like Jo..." whose "whole material and immaterial life is wonderfully strange" (257). It is wonderfully strange indeed considering that Jo does not colonize or domesticate material objects as other characters throughout the book. He shuffles through streets "in utter darkness" since he cannot read the

language or understand the social practices that surround him like a colonized savage.²⁷ He cannot participate in the domestic partly because he has no home, or anywhere to go. He is “hustled, and jostled, and moved on” and thinks “I have no business, here, there, or anywhere; and yet... I am here somehow, too” (257-8). He is in the English nation, but forgotten within it. Jo is asked to “move on,” but since he has no business to move here or there he is unable to locate himself in a new place. He says “I am here somehow, too,” implying he is not the one who moves, but instead stays “here” while the environments around Jo move through him and position him in a kind of placeness.

Raymond Williams offers a helpful way to further analyze Jo’s position and mobility within his environments. He claims that Dickens confuses the names and the characteristics of his characters and their habitats in order to draw attention to what Williams calls the city’s perception. Since London is the central power of the British Empire, this technique of Dickens is particularly telling. It connects people to things in a unique way so that “[t]he city is shown as at once a social fact and human landscape” in order to materialize what is otherwise obscured, in this case, the presence of colonial violence within the English domestic home and nation (158). In the Tom-all-Alones, where Jo lives most of the time, creatures and vermin inhabit individuals and their shelters indiscriminately. Dickens describes the environment in a way that obscures the difference between the body and the building:

As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so, these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and

²⁷ Dickens refers to Jo as a savage. The term is used to parallel Jo to the colonized subjects abroad who were primarily considered lower-class and even less human than British subjects.

comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in its every footprint. (257)

This passage confuses the difference between the Jo and his filthy environment. If this is possible in the heart of the empire, it is possible on foreign territory. And the examples of the ill-advised actions of the philanthropists Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle reveal that focusing on the empire, or the world outside the home, causes a detrimental lack of care of home (Britain).

Despite the vigor that Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle bring to their philanthropic work, they are unable to see the issues that are closer to home. They are incompetent mothers and compassionless do-gooders. They do not even recognize the suffering of young Jo in London since “he is not a genuine foreign-grown savage” but “the ordinary home-made article” (724). Their conception of the “foreign-grown savage” is like that of one of the tasteful paintings that might hang across from the surprised birds in Bleak House’s sitting room. They see her/him as a commodity that it behooves them to domesticate. Furthermore, as the narrator articulates, both are considered savages, whether domestic or foreign. They are both othered and colonized. Furthermore, while viewing London through the lens of cosmopolitan realism in which “London readily [lends] itself to a global imaginary,” or a small-scale representation of the global world, Jo stands in for the “savage” or the colonized in the text (Agathocleous 20). Furthermore, the consumption of foreign goods appears to be just as distracting as philanthropic focus. This novel is not concerned with what consumption of these goods and interference might do in colonial states, but simply emphasizes that these acts are corrosive over time to not only the home, but domestic soil as well.

Jo is constantly pestered to move on and his environment crawls through him, so for him the flux is constant, but he is never able to stop, orient himself and claim a new position in space.

Instead, places and things move through him. He does not belong in domestic spaces; in fact, he infects Charley and Esther when he stays at Bleak House. However, despite Jo's lack of place, his inability to move often locates him at the center of the city. And yet, Mr. Tulkinghorn, the Dedlocks, and Mr. Skimpole, perceive him as a nuisance or even a threat, rather than a child in need. Naturally, Esther recognizes this child's need for care, but unfortunately she and her servant Charlie both become violently ill, further forcing Jo toward the margins of the novel. His invisibility to his countrymen and women make him unwelcome in England. Such a threat casts doubt on the possibility of ever being at home with the empire. Jo's home is a crumbling shelter full of pestilence and vermin. The anxiety over Jo's presence displaces the anxiety or guilt over what should be a young person's suffering, onto the domestic sphere as a perceived threat English domesticity.

Outside the home, women seem to present a threat to English domesticity. There is little discussion of what Mrs. Jellyby may complete through her work, only what she has neglected because of it. Mrs. Pardiggle is no different. While Mrs. Jellyby threatens her home by bringing her foreign philanthropic interests into it, Mrs. Pardiggle brings her family out into her philanthropy. They both pose a threat to their families through their neglect of them, but they go about doing it differently. Mrs. Pardiggle refuses to separate her domestic and business life the way that Mrs. Jellyby does. In fact, she says "I do not go with Mrs. Jellyby in her treatment of her young family.... It has been observed that her young family are excluded from participation in the objects to which she is devoted.... I take them everywhere" (125). This seems to be the source of all the young Pardiggles' frustration and their poor behavior. Esther is disturbed by their terrible manners (and their pinching). She attributes their actions to the "[unnatural constraints]" that their mother places on them and thereby places the blame of their behavior

on Mrs. Pardiggle's failed motherhood (129). Esther's description of Mrs. Pardiggle in and of itself is threatening. Esther describes her as "a formidable style of lady, with spectacles, a prominent nose, and a loud voice, who had the effect of wanting a great deal of room" (125). Her five boys follow behind her, looking very dissatisfied with their lot. As she introduces them, she lists off the charities they contributed to with their allowances. Esther says "[we] had never seen such dissatisfied children" (125). As Mrs. Jellyby's project comes up in conversation, Mrs. Pardiggle proudly claims that her sons "have contributed to the Africa project" (125). Mrs. Pardiggle, like Mrs. Jellyby, dedicates her time and money to philanthropy. Her projects primarily involve the lower-class English. These examples of Mrs. Pardiggle's mothering would indicate that her treatment of her children is not appropriate for the domestic scene. And her interest in "taking care" of the domestic, in terms of the nation, is threatening the home life of her children just like Mrs. Jellyby's.

Mrs. Pardiggle's inability to cultivate a home even affects her ability to do charity work. She is not welcome at the Bricklayer's house, despite her continuous efforts to "do good," so to speak. Esther notes that she and Ada "both felt intrusive and out of place [at the Bricklayer's house]; and we both thought that Mrs. Pardiggle would have got on infinitely better, if she had not had such a mechanical way of taking possession of people" (133). Mrs. Pardiggle takes "possession of people," denying their personhood and agency. In fact, Mrs. Pardiggle's charity work greatly resembles an act of conquest. Her mode of doing charity is more like a business transaction rather than a conciliatory act. Esther believes that the removal of the "iron barrier" between them and the people they meet at the bricklayer's home is hindered by Mrs. Pardiggle's presence. Esther and Ada, however, do connect with two women, Jenny and her sister, by being

domestic exemplars in the working-class home. They bring Jenny comfort for the child she just lost (134-5).

Mrs. Jellyby is also a philanthropist in whose philanthropies Mr. Jarndyce has an interest, though he has reservations about her domestic life. He sends Esther, Ada, and Richard to visit her, partly with an eye to obtaining their opinion of her. Dickens's description, narrated through the eyes of Esther, is the most obvious representation in the novel of anxiety about British involvement abroad. Mrs. Jellyby is tirelessly concerned with the condition of Africa "with a view to the general cultivation of the coffee berry – and the natives – and the happy settlement, on the banks of the African rivers, of our superabundant home population" (50). This anxiety is partly the result, in context, as readers would have realized, of tumultuous colonial relations, particularly in Nigeria. Mrs. Jellyby is pushing for migration and "happy settlement" of the English population in Africa. Mrs. Jellyby's attitude not only shows little concern for how this might affect natives, it also is a distasteful proposal for an English homemaker like Esther because of the climate and the distance from English culture.

Besides its potentially harmful effects on indigenous Africans, one of the major concerns that Mrs. Jellyby's philanthropic pastime raises is the cost it entails for her family. Her constant concern for colonial expansion schemes to the detriment of her family explicitly raises concerns for the state of the English home. The cost of what occurs abroad is nothing, according to this novel, to the cost of what occurs to the domestic fabric of the English home. This is evident from the beginning of this section, when the three companions, Ada, Esther, and Richard arrive at the Jellyby home and they are surprised to find a young Jellyby with his head stuck in the railings because no one has been keeping track of his whereabouts or been concerned even with basic safety in the home (51). Esther observes that Mrs. Jellyby is far more concerned with the

state of Africa than the state of her own household. Her children are dirty and uncared for except for the little her younger daughter attempts. Richard describes Mrs. Jellyby's eyes as if "they could see nothing nearer than Africa!" (52) While her goal is to establish families along the Niger to grow coffee and "educat[e] the natives of Borrioboola-Gha," her own children do not receive the benefit of education that English children should (53). In fact, they are distraught by the severity of their mother's neglect. For example, Miss Clare Jellyby tears up when she says that she has no skills other than assisting her mother with writing. When poor Peepy falls down the stairs, another example of the neglect of even basic safety concerns, Mrs. Jellyby scolds him and then turns back to Africa. In contrast, Ada and Esther, who are properly domestic and maternal, kiss and tend to his injuries (54-5).

The Jellyby house is in complete disarray due to the neglect of the woman who should be its "angel." Regular objects of English domesticity take on irregular uses. For instance, Richard finds a kettle in his room and then has to use a pie dish to wash his hands. Esther also finds a mug that is set in the window and used as a candleholder. And while Esther and Ada choke through a smoking fireplace, Mrs. Jellyby, "with the same sweetness," continues to discuss and compose her letters to Africa (56). The juxtaposition of Mrs. Jellyby's hopes for Africa and Esther's own descriptions of the Jellyby home emphasize Mrs. Jellyby's neglect of her children and thereby the threat that her emphasis on Africa, and the foreign, has on her household. Her daughter, Caddy, is particularly articulate on the distressing state of the Jellyby home: "The whole house disgraceful. The children are disgraceful. I'm disgraceful" (62). To point out the faults of Mrs. Jellyby's domestic management, the properly domestic Esther becomes the mother-figure of this household by simply entering it. She soothes Caddy as she falls asleep

crying in Esther's lap and when Peepy wakes up in the middle of the night, he seeks out Esther (63).

After Richard, Ada, and Esther return from visiting the Jellybys, Mr. Jarndyce experiences the discomfort of the Jellyby home extended into Bleak House. He suffers the heightened anxiety of Bleak House in the form of an easterly wind that Mr. Jarndyce notices throughout the novel in moments of discomfort or frustration. Richard, Ada, and Esther tell Mr. Jarndyce that they believe that Mrs. Jellyby puts too much into her philanthropy for Africa and not enough into her home. Mr. Jarndyce explains and seems to dismiss Mrs. Jellyby's shortcomings by saying "the wind's in the east" (84). He blames the weather and the air it carries to them from the east for the disarray and dilapidation of the Jellyby home by saying "I'll take an oath it's either in the east, or going to be. I am always conscious of an uncomfortable sensation now and then when the wind is blowing in the east" (84). Then when he hears that Esther cared for the Jellyby children he says that he must have been wrong and that there is no easterly wind. Mr. Jarndyce expresses his colonial anxieties through the easterly wind, which is symbolic of the colonial presence in India. While Mr. Jarndyce owns a multipurpose chair from India, the colonial wind excites anxiety within Bleak House and its inhabitants. Even Esther refers to difficult moments as being due east. This implies that the colonial presence in the east, particularly India, is part of that wind that responds to Mr. Jarndyce's discomfort. For that reason, the easterly wind is symbolic of the colonial presence in the home. While Mr. Jarndyce's reference to the easterly wind juxtaposes India in the composition of Bleak House, the wind is also displaced in favor of the domestic problems to which Mr. Jarndyce reacts. Nonetheless, the east wind that rustles through Bleak House haunts the characters and becomes part of the threat to the domestic spaces of Bleak House.

Mrs. Jellyby's desire to help Africa reveals the most potent form of colonial guilt in this novel. And yet, Dickens's representation of her home is devastating. Her children are neglected emotionally, physically, and intellectually. Her house is an example of Freud's *unheimlich*, or the opposite of the familiar, "the un-home."²⁸ The juxtaposition of the colonial with the domestic makes the home an anxious and destructive place. Mrs. Jellyby's concern for the people in Africa, as well as her incessant and irregular letter writing for and obsession with Africa, is displaced by the concern that Esther feels for the degraded Jellyby home and the neglected children, just as the irregularities of the colonial objects in *Bleak House* are displaced in favor of Esther's more immediate experiences of violence and grief. And yet, despite the displacement of colonial anxiety in the Jellyby house and *Bleak House*, *Bleak House* is necessarily remade with new objects for Esther to live in when she marries Mr. Woodcourt. Mr. Jarndyce decorates the "pretty rooms" in Esther's "little tastes and fancies," rather than with the colonial irregularities that Esther encountered when she came to *Bleak House* (963). When Mr. Jarndyce gives Esther the new house he says "it's a West wind, little woman, due West!" (966). His reversal of the wind removes the anxiety that the eastern world, such as India, presents for the English home. The novel ends with Esther's final narrative at the new *Bleak House*. By leaving the old *Bleak House* and resettling in a newer version, Esther symbolically denies both the trauma of her past and the naturalized or emptied colonial objects that her trauma displaced. Consequently, Esther's move and marriage belies the presence of violence through the consumption of domestic spaces and colonial clutter.

²⁸ For more information, see Sigmund Freud's "The Uncanny."

Conclusion

Findings:

In *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House*, Dickens shows concern about what goes on within the intimate walls of the English home. As one might expect from a house with “bleak” in the title, these intimate spaces of the home are dark and destructive. I argued that there are two unique forms of violence that operate within these novels: slow violence of the everyday and immediate violence that comes with a blow or a sudden shock. Some examples of immediate violence and trauma might be the blow Florence receives from her imperialist father or Esther’s abandonment by her parents, Dickens’s abrupt representation of Esther’s aunt’s emotional abuse of her, and the trauma from her near death from illness.

In contrast, slow violence or the everyday is a form of accumulated acts or practices that seem insignificant in the moment, but can result in severe consequences and degradation over time. For example, the naturalized practices of the everyday are apparent in Major Bagstock’s repetitive beatings of his servant or the anxiety attached to colonial clutter of the decorative furniture and paintings in *Bleak House*. Slow violence is a form of violence that accumulates over time in everyday practices and objects and is often naturalized and displaced as mundane and insignificant in favor of these more apparent and immediate forms of violence. Thus, the immediate forms of violence are the major concerns of these novels. Practices of the everyday are overshadowed by these strikingly violent events, denying the presence of violence in the naturalized practices of the everyday. The process of violent and shocking events overshadowing the more mundane and naturalized practices of the everyday occurs in order to avoid colonial anxiety and guilt, but results in the destruction of domestic spaces.

The homes in these novels collapse, mold, and are torn down for railroads. They tell bloody stories about Captain Cook and the Hawaiians to shocked birds and have ghosts stalking through their corridors. These homes are full of worry and fear, but that fear is purposefully directed away from the British Empire. The presence of immediate violence and trauma in the home displaces the colonial anxiety that is apparent in the juxtaposition of colonial and domestic objects within the home. This is done in order to avoid the fear, anxiety, and guilt of the colonial world, but as a result wreaks havoc on the intimate spaces of the English home.

Future Research:

For this thesis, I chose to examine the intersections of violence, in the forms slow violence and trauma, and colonialism in *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House*. But my emphasis on violence required that I be particularly sensitive to how I discussed trauma, since the concept of trauma as psychological form of wounding was not established until the end of the nineteenth-century and not all forms of violence result in trauma. In order to differentiate between these forms of violence, I also sought to articulate possible histories that were embedded in Dickens's representations of home, such as the Native from India or the people in Nigeria that Mrs. Jellyby wants to help. The ambiguous references to these individuals and their histories made this project intriguing, but also narrowed its representation of colonial histories. This study would benefit from further investigation into the unacknowledged histories of the colonial objects and people in this text, such as the importation of Indian chairs like the one in *Bleak House*, or the importation of servants from India after military service.

Additionally, my focus on violence and colonialism prohibited much discussion of gender or ecocriticism. It seems significant that both Florence Dombey and Esther Summerson are female victims of domestic abuse whose environments are limited to the home. Conversely,

their major parental relationships are with members of the opposite sex who remain at a distance for the majority of each novel. For instance, Esther's conflict is with her mother, while Florence's is with her father. The representation of violence in these and other novels would benefit from attention to the ways that gender is significant to acts of violence. What is more, Dickens often represents his houses and landscapes as characters in his stories. His narrators move across and through the cities, usually London, with a unique form of movement. My research has taken me into the significance of movement in Dickens's work and I believe this thesis could broaden to deduce whether movement can be a form of violence to characters or a protection against it.

Moreover, I think it would be helpful to consider other ways that trauma theory works in some of Charles Dickens's other works. For instance, I believe it would be advantageous to examine other instances of physical abuse in Dickens's other novels. Quite a lot of work has been published on Dickens's own childhood trauma and its correlation with *David Copperfield* as well as his experience of shock and possibly PTSD after he was in a railroad crash. For my research, I would look for instances of flashbacks and dream-like states that come from severe forms of violence or degradation in works such as *Little Dorrit*, *A Christmas Carol*, and "The Haunted Man," in order to further examine the kinds of experiences that Dickens does and does not represent as traumatic.

My study of *Dombey and Son* and *Bleak House* is significant to Victorian studies because of its use of Rob Nixon's slow violence to discuss grief and violence in the nineteenth-century. Typically his writing is applied to contemporary work or used in tandem with postcolonialism. However, his discussion of slow violence provides a unique way of looking at violence and the impact it has on a society pervaded by the presence of colonialism. My separation of slow

violence and immediate violence, which often leads to trauma, articulates the differentiation between the two forms of violence and justifies a discussion about the nineteenth-century “everyday” as a possibly violent practice, despite its mundane appearance. Additionally, my emphasis on the monstrosity of the home as a result of the displacement of colonial objects onto domestic spaces contributes to the discussion of the discomfort resulting from being at home with the empire. Trauma theory was a helpful approach for understanding violence and grief in these novels and the violence that occurred simultaneously outside of England. Cathy Caruth claims that “[t]he traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them” (5). The ability to understand the severity of trauma allows us to sympathize with the victims of violence and literature provides a mode for representing the irregularities and horror of trauma and violence, particularly from a different time period. Our forms of representing pain and violence have changed with our modes of understanding it. By studying the representations of trauma and violence in nineteenth-century literature, we can better understand the ways that our perceptions of violence, anxiety, and trauma have adapted since 1853. Additionally, we observe the anxiety of Dickens’s own past seeping into the unconscious empathy of this novel and surprising us with his complex representation of Victorian shock and invisible slow violence of the everyday.

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